

Scotia Archaeology

**REPORT
TO
SCOTTISH & SOUTHERN ENERGY**

**EARTH WIRE TRENCH
AT
RHUNAHORINE,
KINTYRE, ARGYLL**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL
WATCHING BRIEF
SEPTEMBER 2015**

*Lismore
Dollerie Terrace
Crieff
Perthshire
Tel: 01764-652638
email: scotarc@btinternet.com*

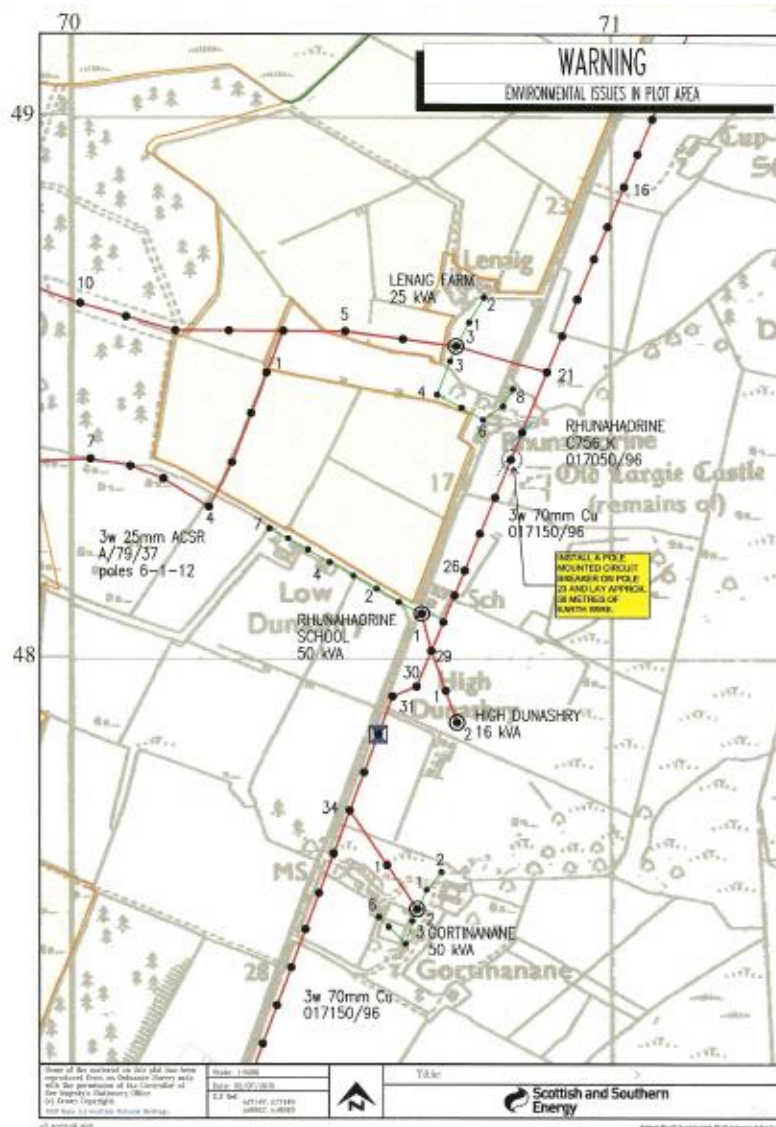
INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken by Scotia Archaeology for Scottish & Southern Energy plc (SSE) during the excavation of a trench to accommodate an earth wire at Rhunahaorine, Kintyre, Argyll.

The trench was located close to the remains of Old Largie Castle and the sparse remnants of a post-medieval farmstead which are believed to overlie them. As a consequence, the West of Scotland Archaeology Service (WoSAS), advised SSE that an archaeological watching brief should be implemented during trenching.

THE SITE

Rhunahaorine is a small hamlet comprising a few farms and houses and a school astride the A83 road, some 43km south of Lochgilphead and 28km north of Campbeltown. The location of the site is shown on the map below, supplied by SSE. The earth wire trench is highlighted in blue as a broken line running southwards from Pole 23.



Location map of site

Pole 23 and the earth wire trench are located close to the remains of Old Largie Castle. The description given below is based on records held by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS).

The castle (NR74NW 6), located at NR 7085 4832, was the one-time home of the MacDonalds of Largie who owned estates in Kintyre from the mid-15th century although from the late 18th century the family's principal residence was at Tayinloan, some 3km to the south. In 1861 the castle was described as '...merely a fortified house, strong but plain in character' (Bede 1861, 229). Bede stated that two features from the old castle appeared to stand within the farmstead which was already a ruin by that date: a cellar at the south-west corner of the site and short stretches of barmkin wall on the north and east sides of the farm.

In 1868 Ordnance Survey investigators visited Old Largie Castle and reported that '...only a small portion of the side wall...' of the castle survived, the remainder of the site being overlain by the farmsteading of High Rhunahaorine. The farm is believed to have been built in the late 18th or early 19th century but very little of it is now visible.

Between the A83 and the sea, 1km to its west, the ground is quite flat and given over to a mixture of arable farming and good quality grazing for cattle and sheep. To the east of the road the land rises gently through poorer grazing, the castle ruins standing midway up the slope. At that point the ground has been levelled somewhat, probably to accommodate the castle.

THE WATCHING BRIEF

The watching brief was undertaken by John Lewis of Scotia Archaeology on 9 September 2015, a mild, occasionally sunny day. Excavation was undertaken using a small mechanical excavator, the trench running southwards from Pole 23 (at NR 70851 48366) to NR 70835 48340, roughly following the route of an overhead power line although the trench curved slightly towards the west to avoid the edge of the artificial platform upon which the ruins of the castle and farmstead stand.

The trench measured approximately 33m long, 0.35m wide and 0.5m deep. It cut through coarse grass and topsoil of pale brown, gritty loam with gravel. Topsoil overlay glacial till of orange clay with gravel, pebbles and occasional larger boulders.

No structures, features or deposits of archaeological significance were uncovered within the trench and no artefacts were retrieved from it.



Earth wire trench and Pole 23, viewed from the south



Earth wire trench, viewed from the north

OLD LARGIE CASTLE

During the watching brief the opportunity was taken for a brief investigation of Old Largie Castle and the remains of the farmstead that reportedly overlie it. The only buildings of which anything now stands consist of two adjoining structures in the south-west corner of the site (see below).



The remains of two buildings in the south-west corner of the site, viewed from the south

The westernmost of these buildings survives as a cellar, now almost completely infilled with rubble and overgrown with hawthorn trees. It measures 7.8m east/west by 6m wide overall with mortar-bonded walls of random rubble standing up to 2m high.

Abutting the east side of this building is another structure which measures 7.3m east/west by 6m wide. Clearly these two structures formed at least part of a single range of buildings which, on the evidence of the cellarge in one of them, was probably an element of Old Largie Castle. It might be reasonable to suggest that this short range continued to be occupied when the castle was replaced by the post-medieval farm.

The principal seat of the MacDonalds of Old Largie is believed to have been transferred to Tayinloan in the late 18th century (RCAHMS 1971, 160), around the time that High Rhunahaorine farm came into being. It might be that this process was simply a renaming exercise, perhaps with the ownership of the castle being passed to a junior member of the family.



The cellar, viewed from the south



Putative barmkin wall, viewed from the north

The only other standing structure thought to be contemporary with the late medieval castle consists of the remains of what is believed to be a barmkin wall on the east side of the site (see above). It is built of mortar-bonded rubble and now stands to a maximum height of 2.4m. There is a return at the north end of this wall although its south end peters out as the ground slopes down towards a small stream.

The drystone foundations of another wall about the putative east barmkin wall, roughly midway along its surviving length, perhaps indicating the limit of a later farm enclosure measuring approximately 30m east/west by 22m wide.

CONCLUSIONS

On the evidence of the structures still standing, it is impossible to tell what Old Largie Castle originally comprised. Although the barmkin appears to have been quite large, the only structures now visible within it are the two relatively small buildings at its south-west corner. It seems unlikely that the cellared building, clearly the earliest of those two structures, was the castle's principal dwelling and it must be wondered whether a more imposing tower was completely demolished when the castle was abandoned, leaving no trace above ground.



Extract from first edition OS map

Other than the drystone wall that divides the original barmkin, there is little that can be ascribed with confidence to the post-medieval farmstead although the first edition Ordnance Survey map, published in 1882, shows the ruins that are still visible as well as a range to its north-east of which nothing was noted at the time of the watching brief.

Clearly, until the hawthorn trees and other vegetation that cover the area are removed it will be difficult to undertake a detailed survey of the site. Even then, little more might be revealed beyond what is already evident.

REFERENCES

Bede, C 1861 *Glencreggan: or a Highland home in Cantire*, 2v. London.

RCAHMS 1971 *The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland: an inventory of the ancient monuments of Argyll, 1, Kintyre*. Edinburgh.